

U.S. Funds Sought For a Teen Center In Upcounty Area

Officials Trying to Suppress Gangs

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Montgomery County officials are seeking federal money for an upcounty center that would provide teens with after-school activities and keep them away from gangs, hoping to duplicate a project in the Takoma Park/Langley Park area.

The center would offer mental-health counseling, post-incarceration support, job training and placement, legal help, educational programs and tattoo removal.

Officials are requesting \$690,000 in federal funding for the center, which would serve as the prevention and outreach prong of the county's two-pronged approach to combating gangs. The fiscal 2009 federal request package also includes \$2 million to launch a second gang suppression unit in the police department, with four gang investigators and a supervisor.

Opened in 2006, the Takoma Park/Langley Park area center serves 300 youths and has helped them in such areas as self-confidence, communication, anger management, drug use and arrests, according to data in the federal request.

"With the youth we're working with, we're seeing positive outcomes," said Kate Garvey, spokeswoman for the county's Department of Health and Human Services. "It's been an effective approach, of course, when done in concert with suppression activities."

The center would be a key step toward improving the county's "amazingly disjointed" approach to youth resources, said County Council President Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty).

"We don't have a strategy, we don't know how many kids we're reaching, we don't know how many slots we have out there," he

said. "Every time we ask for that, we hear, 'Well, that's a hard number to get.' Well, then how do we know what we're doing? How do we know if it's working?"

It will require investment on the front end, but it will pay off over the next 30 years, with some of the youths likely to go to college, Knapp said.

"There's tremendous opportunity," he said. "We have to get them actively engaged, show them positive things, rather than hoping that they stumble into the right program, or right friend, or

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County officials haven't decided whether the center will be in Gaithersburg or Germantown, Garvey said.

Officials have also begun discussions with Gaithersburg about a partnership with a youth center possibly coming to the city's Olde Towne, she said.

If the federal funding does not come through for the youth center, officials plan to look for a partnership with private entities.

"We're going to keep looking for private dollars," Garvey said. "But in this budget situation, we don't anticipate being funded by the county."